

## Admiral Seymour (1787-1872), the British and California, 1846

By John Fox

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Seymour was also portrayed sailing into Monterey on a "prearranged signal," then humiliated when Sloat and U.S. Consul Thomas O. Larkin "forcibly placed" a "British agent" onto *Collingwood*. Rumour, the tradition asserts, even went round the American naval squadron in late July that Seymour had not quit the scene but was lurking below the horizon awaiting reinforcements for a sneak attack on the U.S. fleet at anchor.<sup>1</sup> The picture of an elderly British expansionist, frustrated by President James K. Polk, Sloat, John C. Fremont and Manifest Destiny, is an understandable product of its time. Like its patriotic counterpoint, the "heroic" Fremont, it was more caricature than reality.

It was too much for historian Hubert H. Bancroft. "The English did not deem California a desirable acquisition at the price of serious complications with a foreign government...the game was not worth the candle...[although] a proposed [British] protectorate [is] plausible" (*History of California Vol. V, 1886*). Bancroft had a hunch, but no British or other documentary evidence at hand. He could only invoke circumstance and common sense. The British, he believed,



Admiral Seymour, c. 1850, Portrait by John Lucas (Courtesy Marquess of Hertford)

were *not* expanding into California, although many feared they were; Fremont, Larkin and President Polk cashed in on this widespread belief to make themselves look like the liberator-founders of Anglo-California. In this atmosphere, Eugene MacNamara's "Irish colony" proposal for the San Joaquin Valley<sup>2</sup> assumed the proportions of a cunning British plot. (Whoever heard, Bancroft mused, of the British using the *Irish* as prime colonisers? Admiral Seymour wondered too.)

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SEYMOUR (1787-1872)

ISH AND CALIFORNIA, 1846"

UN TERRITORIAL QUARTERLY  
WINTER 1995

OLLINGWOOD" 80 gun flagship

WAR 1812  
Capt. Seymour  
Capt. Miller  
Sloot  
Biddle  
Skelton

• 1840 in New York  
and Canada

Hosted by Capt. Jas. Biddle

Born

1787

Warwickshire England

1997/066

1797

joined ADM. NELSON, part of time aboard  
his flagship

1815

• 1815 - pensioned at 18.

1841

served parliament, WM. IV as naval aide-de-camp  
promoted to ADMIRALTY

1844

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE PACIFIC STA

based at VALPARRISO, CHILE  
PRIME MINISTER ROBERT PEELE

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tively want *possession* of California, or was she merely thinking of a temporary *protectorate*? Was her main policy negative, namely that no other nation should have the province? Was Eugene MacNamara a British agent or a private individual who happened to hitch a lift at the wrong moment? What was the mission of HMS *Juno*, ordered to California in May? Did Sloat and Seymour really *race* to grab California?

Seymour's own neglected account offers an answer.

### The Seymour Papers

It is always difficult to discover the mind of a serving officer under orders. Rear Admiral Sir George Seymour was a loyal public servant, but also an intelligent thinker. A much-travelled and cultured man, he was a meticulous diarist, correspondent and a wide reader. His papers are lodged with other Seymour family papers in the archives of their home county, Warwickshire, in England. Seymour's Pacific logbooks, letterbooks and signals are certainly known to American historians.<sup>3</sup> But elsewhere in the same huge collection, two items have gone unnoticed - Seymour's pri-

ate journal of an 1840 visit to the United States and his *private* diary for 1846. Neither was written for official or public consumption. The diary even suggests explanations for the anecdotes told against Sir George.

Seymour admitted, in a letter to his son from Monterey, to being "in bad spirits" (*Private Letterbook, July 19th*), but rudeness toward Captain Sloat would have been inconsistent with Sloat's own reports to Washington, Seymour's code as a gentleman and the cordial relationships he had long enjoyed with senior U.S. Navy officers. It would also fail to match the man of the diaries and logbooks. The gentlemanly code should not be underestimated, nor should it be confused with rank. "General Guterriez [Gutierrez] came on board. Was saluted with 15 guns. He was seasick and has not the manners of a gentleman" (*Private Diary, April 18th, Mazatlan*).

Seymour was neither simple sailor nor office warrior. He had joined Admiral Nelson's navy at age 10 in 1797 and served for 18 years, some of them like his father before him on Nelson's own flagship, HMS *Victory*. His father and future father-in-law were admi-



### Admiral Seymour From Page 6

erals. With a pension at 28 and face wounds by which to remember the French - his diary frequently speaks of "headaching weather" - he served Parliament and then William IV as naval Aide-de-Camp until promoted to the Admiralty in 1841. Three years later, he was posted back to sea as Commander in Chief of the Pacific Station, based at Valparaiso, Chile. At 57 he was a young commander. (Sloat, his American counterpart, was 67.) He suffered gout but thought nothing of swimming ashore from anchorage off San Blas, or of a five day trek into Mexico complete with sketchbook to see a silver mine. His large collection of exotic seashells gathered on Pacific beaches during this period is still in his family's hands. The combination of politically experienced Sea Lord Ellenborough and a new 80-gun flagship, HMS *Collingwood*, showed the importance Britain and Prime Minister Robert Peel attached to the Pacific. HMS *America*, hydrographing off the Oregon coast in 1845 with a watching brief (area of responsibility) over California, was commanded by the Foreign Secretary's brother with the Prime Minister's son as senior Lieutenant. Frigates, sloops and a steamer made up the rest of a wide-flung squadron of 15 vessels. Bancroft rightly assessed it as "an unusually strong British fleet," which lent credence to a threat from Britain. California, however, was not its main focus.

### The Pacific Station

New Zealand, Australia and Canada were being colonised. The Oregon-California border had still not been settled between Britain and America and could have been a cause of war. America was expanding - a policy privately described by Seymour as "offensive and grasping" - and had openly demanded of Mexico the right to buy California. Britain, France and the U.S. knew as well as the Mexicans that there was mineral wealth under northern California. Seymour wrote in May of a new "quicksilver mine 80 miles north of Monterey which will make the Americans more hungry than ever for California" (*To British Consul James Forbes, Tepic, 6th May*). The Americans had already raised the flag at Monterey in 1842, apologising to Mexico for the gaffe two days later. The friendship of the Hawaiian rulers was valued by London, given British concern about France and the U.S. Both had set-

ters and increasing influence on the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and on the Society Islands (Tahiti).

France and America had also allied against Britain in the relatively recent past - the war of 1812 was a personal memory for older serving officers on both sides. Seymour had been a captain in 1812; British Consul-General Miller at Honolulu had been a redcoat colonel; their American opposites, Sloat and Biddle, had been junior naval officers in 1812; Stockton a midshipman. The War of Independence itself was only seventy years previous, almost as vivid as is the Japanese war today after fifty years. Both sides held firm wartime stereotypes of each other, which lasted all the longer because of the slowness of communications. (It was Navy men who four years later channeled this longstanding rivalry into the first America's Cup Race, 1851!)

At the same time Seymour had warmed to the Americans in 1840, reading his De Toqueville carefully

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on the voyage out. *Democracy in America* was a best-seller, read by everyone trying to understand the new "Americans." Senior American naval officers gave Seymour every courtesy in New York. He found much attachment to Britain and the Crown within American naval tradition. "My first impression of the Yankees on their own territory is in favour of their good temper." He noted portraits of King William IV and Queen Victoria in the U.S. Navy library, "proof of the friendly feeling which exists," a feeling which he thought would increase "from the facility of intercourse steamships have created." No doubt the roast had been good and the port passed many times in the Ward Room of USS *North Carolina* the night he noted, "Her band played God Save the Queen and Hail Columbia when I left her" (*Private Journal of Visit to Canada and USA 1840*). He and Captain James Biddle, whose family hosted him in 1840, were still corresponding during 1846 - Seymour was quitting California and Biddle was coming on station for the Mexican War. Serving soldiers often respect former enemies more than do politicians or civilian populations. It would take more than a local war to break this pattern. Even the London press played it down - *The Illustrated London News* blamed an influen-

tial American "war party" desperate to quarrel "in some direction" if not with Britain; history had seen "stranger events than Jacksons and Polks sitting on the throne of the Montezumas" (*ILN, June 6th 1846*).

Sir George's involvement in California was as a commander under orders to monitor British Pacific interests subject to international treaty law. The law did matter to Seymour - he was not a freebooting adventurer. Overstretched and isolated, if not quite outgunned, he repeatedly warned London that his brief was impossible. He had to cover disputes in Oregon, Mexico, Tahiti and Hawaii, ready always to anticipate and pre-empt French and American squadrons. The Horn and the South American coastline were also in his area of responsibility. As a serving officer he took orders (even orders to do the impossible such as take California), whatever his personal misgivings. It was also his duty to communicate those misgivings. If "direct intervention" is to be the policy, he wrote from Mazatlan to the British Vice-Consul at Monterey on May 10th, "send me orders and I shall lose no time." "Not a syllable" of orders came from his government 7000 miles away. Twenty days later he wrote to the British Ambassador (Minister) in Mexico City, "I wish I had encouragement to interfere with [Sloat, en route to California] but after [Mexico's attack on the Rio Bravo] it would be uphill work to argue that the Mexicans were not at war." Ironically, Sloat too had complained of lack of orders and stretched lines of communication. Both were in similar predicaments over California; both were called vacillators and expansionists in the same breath!

Once California had been taken by "Jonathan" (Seymour's nickname for the U.S. in his diary and letters to his son), the British flotilla melted away from the California coast. Seymour seemed realistic, resigned and even relieved it was all over. "I do not want to stay in these seas a day longer than the usual period," he wrote from anchor at Monterey, now in American hands, on July 19th. "Things have gone wrong in both the quarters which have principally occupied me...I don't like turning my back on a difficulty...I feel I was entitled to instructions on a subject which I called to their [London's] attention beginning in March 1845 when I predicted what has since happened, but have not yet had a syllable in answer" (*Letters to son Francis, June 13th and July 19th*). Far from lurking offstage to ambush Captain Robert Stockton's Squadron, he was

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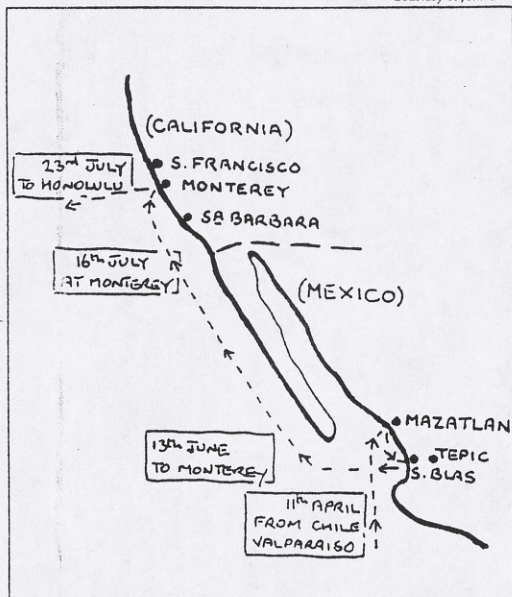


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well on his way to the Sandwich Islands, reading diplomatic papers, penning correspondence, conversing with Eugene MacNamara and even reading Fremont's survey of 1844 lent him by an American officer. Seymour appeared to be able to switch off yesterday and concentrate on today. "Today" for some time already had been Hawaii; California was yesterday's problem. His diary does note, however, that after weighing anchor at Monterey on July 23rd, he was becalmed in fog the following day, with "mountainous black fin whales spouting all round the ship." Every legend has its kernel, and this enforced halt could have given rise to the American rumour of his feint below the horizon.

Hospitality and courtesy traditional to naval officers were regularly exchanged between Seymour and Sloat for the fifteen months they crossed courses in the Pacific, beginning in Honolulu in March 1845. They dined and played whist together, carried each other's despatches (including Seymour's private mail to wife and daughters at Valparaiso) and helped with supplies and repairs. This rapport continued on the Mexican coast at San Blas and Mazatlan. The two commanders

Courtesy of John Fox



Seymour's California Patrol, April-July 1846.

had a measure of understanding between them. They even advised each other of intended actions. In fact, Sloat wrote to Washington in August, "The Admiral's visit [to Monterey in July] was very serviceable to our cause in California as the inhabitants fully believed he would take part with them" (cited by Bancroft). This hardly suggests peevish guests in the Ward Room, let alone embarrassing partners at whist!

Seymour certainly had reason to be "in bad spirits," as he called it, at Monterey. Gout and headaches laid him up in his cabin from time to time. London had been silent and unhelpful. Sloat had beaten him to it - although the "Yankee trick" story was unlikely - Seymour's private diary shows that Sloat was told of the Mexican War before he or Seymour thought of leaving Mexico for California. When Sloat did go it was a full week before Seymour decided to go as well and there is no mention in any Seymour journal of "following Sloat." When Sloat reached Monterey it was a full week before he hoisted the American flag. This was hardly a "race"! Both commanders had orders not to intervene in California, save only on certain conditions. Sloat's conditions had been created, namely war with Mexico and therefore with the Mexican province. Seymour's conditions, namely the declaration of

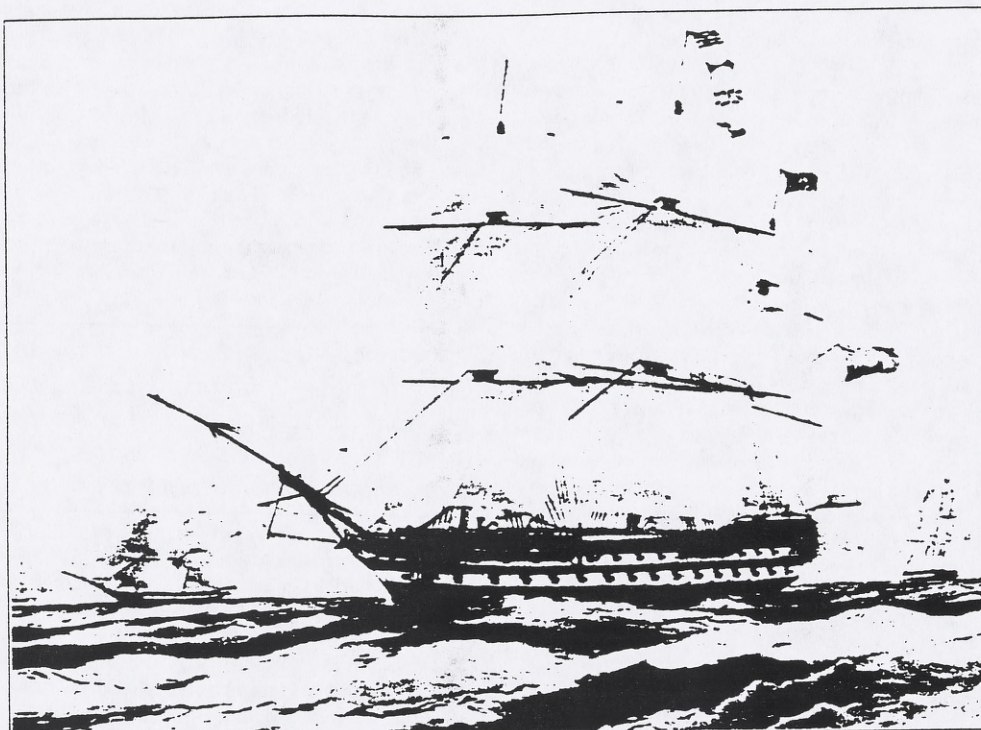


Captain John D. Sloat

independence from Mexico by the Californians, followed by a request for British help, were never created and California remained Mexican to the end.

Both commanders acted as gentlemen, despite Sloat's sending Seymour in May a "chart of the Gulf of California to copy, which proved very inaccurate" (*Private Diary*, May 9th). Whatever their suspicions, each kept the other informed of moves and intentions. Seymour signalled to Sloat in Mazatlan on May 11th that he was embarking Eugene MacNamara (see page 33) and Theodore Hartweg, plant collector in Mexico for the London Royal Horticultural Society, on HMS *Juno* bound for Monterey and San Francisco (*Private Diary*, May 11th). It was Seymour's right to treat with Californians; it was also Sloat's right since news had not yet reached him of the war on the Rio Bravo, nor did it until much later in May. When news of war be-





HMS Collingwood at sea under full sail. Nearly 200 feet long and with a compliment of 750 men, she was part floating embassy and part capital warship.

tween the United States and Mexico did come through, Seymour's task was to remain on friendly terms with both sides. Britain was not involved and that extended to California as long as it remained Mexican territory.

Seymour did feel let down by the Mexicans in their just but rash war. "I sent *Juno* as soon as I could to see whether the Californians had had the good sense to declare themselves clear of Mexico before it got them into a scrap! But I doubt they or any people with Span-

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ish American blood in their veins having good sense about anything" (Letter to Captain Gordon, HMS America,

25th May). His mind was racing as he was required to monitor British interests in California, be ready in case of war over Oregon, heed the French fleet making war noises round the Society Islands (Tahiti) and mediate a dispute on the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) where antagonism between British subjects and native rulers was creating an opening for American influence. Settlers were making Texas and Oregon into virtual American territory; Hawaii was on the same path, Americans now outnumbering British inhabitants two to one. "Things have gone wrong in both the quarters which have principally occupied me," Seymour complained.

#### "Mr. Macnamara"

On board HMS Collingwood in April 1846, Seymour, the establishment Anglican, welcomed the "young

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Irishman, Mr. Macnamara [MacNamara], educated as a priest, an active, intelligent gentleman sent me with a strong recommendation [from the British ambassador in Mexico]. He had a scheme of taking 5000 Irish to this country and has gained some influence in Mexico - I ordered him a passage in *Junio* to California arriving with so good a testimonial and having travelled with my nephews from Mexico who thought well of him - but I am afraid he is two years too late to be of any use in California. Its situation is irremediable" (*Letter to Admiralty, from San Blas, 13th June, 1846. Also Private Diary, April 26th, May 2nd, 9th and 11th*).

Navy hospitality was (and is) proverbial. Irishmen as guests or crewmen were no strangers to the decks of British or U.S. war ships. British Catholics, mainly Irish, had many of their legal disabilities removed in 1829; many penal handicaps had been already annulled by popular practice long before that. The Irish land issue was not a simple struggle between Catholic tenant and Protestant landlord, but between an increasing population and a limited amount of supportive land. During the terrible Irish Famine, many Catholic 'strong farmers' and middlemen proved as ruthless to their countrymen as the worst Protestant estate owner: dog often ate dog. There were, however, no Government emigration schemes, only private initiatives. Bancroft suggests MacNamara was employed by a London company posing as such, but which may have been holders of Mexican bonds trying to compensate themselves for money owed. An Irish Catholic negotiator had more in common with Mexicans than a London Protestant. By the summer of 1846, the Irish potato crop had failed just one season - 1845 - and while it was a tragedy, it

was not yet the catastrophe and famine it would soon become after a second failed season and a record savage winter. Seymour was aware in June that "great distress prevails in Ireland," but put some of it down to the sensationalist American press which "always contrives." On the evening of April 26th, "Dined in Ward Room. The Rev Mr Macnamara dined on board" (*Private Diary*).

"Mr Macnamara" as Seymour called him - "Father" came with the mid-century Italianisation of the Catholic church and was spoken convention only - wanted Irish colonists in California (see DTQ, No. 20, 1995 "The California That Nearly Was"). Seymour discussed it with him during many ship dinners noted in Seymour's private diary. They also covered Purgatory, horticulture, Fremont and other matters. "I had much pleasure in making his acquaintance when he arrived on the English merchant ship *Alexander Grant* from San Blas. I wish he had taken up the matter of filling California with 'Emeralders' some years earlier as the present prospect seems [to be off] its being inhabited by people whose objects and moral qualities are not so true. MacNamara also brought me your interesting letter on Mexican-U.S. politics" (*Letter to British Minister, Mexico City, from Mazatlan, 26th April 1846*).

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Seymour had a soft spot for the "Emeralders" - the gentlest of contemporary nicknames for the Irish - and the family had Irish estates. Others warmed to this Irishman about whom tantalisingly little is known. They may also have cooled as MacNamara's vehement hates came to the surface - of Protestant Yankees, English politicians and apparently Methodists. Despite the initial warmth and sharing the same ship to Honolulu, MacNamara fades from the Seymour papers, public and private, in late July.

Some Irish settlers had already acquired large land holdings in California. There were obvious advantages for Britain in a strong Californian colony, but 1846 was not the time and the Irish were the wrong ones for British purposes. In August Seymour made his final report from Honolulu to London and warned in retro-



spect that even if colonists had been sent out, they would have had to be "emigrants on whom reliance could be placed to establish any British ascendancy. Without these I think it preferable that no attempt should have been made to connect the honour or interests of Great Britain with the possession of California." MacNamara was a lone player, though possibly fronting others. That Seymour had to explain about him to London confirms he was no "British agent."

MacNamara needed to look at the land he wanted from Mexico. Theo Hartweg, the London botanist and well known scientific figure, had been unable to get into California during the American blockade. The same would have applied to MacNamara. With Hartweg he hitched a lift on an acceptable neutral vessel when HMS *Juno* was ordered north in mid-May. Seymour may have thought his presence in California a useful delaying tactic and a handy link with the Californios. The notion of Sloat's forcing MacNamara aboard Seymour's ship at the very end of July is unthinkable, a serious breach of etiquette, peace and consistency! The pretext could not even arise: MacNamara's dealings were open and with Mexico; colonisation was accepted practice by Britain, France and America; Seymour kept Sloat informed about MacNamara's movements in May - although Larkin later pumped it up into a conspiracy for Washington's consumption. Fremont then hitched himself to the rumour of threat. Britain and America, however, were still at peace and the Oregon question was settled by the beginning of June.

### HMS *Juno*'s Mission to Alta California

HMS *Juno* sailed from Mazatlan on May 12, 1846 carrying MacNamara and Hartweg. (No one has yet suggested that the botanist was a British agent!) Seymour had told the ambassador in Mexico City, "I shall probably send *Juno* off to see what is going on" (To Chas Bankhead, May 8th, from Mazatlan). Sloat, at anchor in the same harbour, was formally "advised" on May 11th "as it was known that Mr Macnamara and Hartweg were to be embarked" (*Private Diary*, May 11th). *Juno*'s orders were to "examine the landing places near San Francisco and Monterey with reference to any operations which may hereafter become necessary...the number of British subjects settled in California [and] a quicksilver mine reputed in Upper California" (*CinC's Journal*, May 12th). It was the routine foresight required

of any peacetime commander with no prejudice to peace itself. *Juno*, although new and fast, was hardly a threat as an unescorted sloop of only 26 guns. Her captain was to refrain from force, to "observe and ascertain," and "to counteract any inclination of the Californians to place themselves under the exclusive control or Protection of any foreign power without the participation of Great Britain." This was subject to one important condition, "in the event of California declaring or having declared its independence of Mexico" (*Letter to Admiralty from San Blas*, June 13th, 1846). California did not do so, nor had "Her Majesty's Government hitherto sanctioned any expectation that British assistance will be offered." Already Seymour and Sloat knew about the war on the Texas frontier with Mexico. "May 22. When I went ashore in the evening a courier had been sent to acquaint Sloat that Arista had crossed the Rio Bravo to attack General Taylor"; two days later, "Received confidential letter from Forbes (*Consul at Tepic*) about a directive given to Commodore Sloat" (*Private Diary*, May 22nd, 24th).<sup>5</sup> Writing to Gordon, the Foreign Secretary's brother and captain of HMS *America*, he forecast, "An easy [American] victory will make them vainglorious over their wretched foes."

Seymour's only guide to action now was treaty law and common sense; the former allowed protection to an independent nation under threat; the latter suggested Seymour was in no position to offer more than token help. London and the nearest Ambassador remained silent. "Nothing still from either Mexico or Admiralty," he wrote in his private diary after he "swam ashore with nephews and breakfasted *pic nic*" en route to see Forbes at Tepic on May 27th. From years close to government in London he knew the policy pursued by Aberdeen and Peel which had kept Britain

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out of any war since 1815 - a brinkmanship and bluff which might one day be called! Seymour's only written policy guide seems to have been a memorandum from Lord Aberdeen, Foreign Secretary, to the Consul General of the Pacific at Honolulu in December 1844. Seymour had received it in May 1845 and Bankhead had passed on other comments from Mexico City. "I have not deemed it advisable to proceed to California under the views of Earl Aberdeen to HM Minister in Mexico deprecating interference while California formed part of the Mexican Republic. I however sent *Juno* to Monterey and San Francisco on May 12th to ascertain the security of British subjects and observe what was happening" (*Letter to Admiralty, from San Blas, 13th June 1846*). Once the issue was decided, he wrote from Monterey harbour under the American flag to his soldier son Francis in London: "The presence of *Collingwood* and *Juno* here has been unnecessary, but that would not have been the case had the people the good sense to declare independence in time. I am writing as you will see in bad spirits" (*Private Letterbook, 19th July, Monterey*).

### HMS *Collingwood* Race or Reinforcement?

U.S. Captain John Sloat sailed for California on June 8, 1846. That day several of Seymour's "officers on-shore killed 31 alligators" (*Private Diary*). Almost a week later the Admiral signalled ahead to HMS *Juno* off California that he was coming. "I sail today for Monterey but it is not probable that my stay there will be of any continuance" (*Order Book, 14 June*). The pre-

vious day he had told his son Francis of his decision, "without much expectation of doing any good. My principle motive is that I dislike turning my back on a difficulty. The fact is that 'Jonathan' earnestly desires to make the acquisition and I do not know that our government has any such desire, but I should like, if they have not got San Francisco [*to persuade through Captain Blake of Juno*] they would do better without a protectorate or rule over them of any kind. I expect to find the choice is out of their hands. I shall sail tonight" (*Letter, 13th June*).

The reason for Seymour's decision was not Sloat's movement, but information he had received from the Consul at Tepic. Forbes had sent word of an assembly called at Santa Barbara, the provincial convention centre of the Californias. "13th June, Express from Mr Forbes with accounts that a convention is summoned in California for the 15th inst to get a protectorate. Decided to go at once to Monterey to see if *Juno* has taken any part but the Mexican aggression will have enabled the U.S. government to sup it before my arrival" (*Private Diary*). Seymour saw Santa Barbara as the one chance for California to become independent. That day he fired off a broadside of mail - to the Admiralty, to his friend and Sea Lord, Ellenborough, to his son Francis and to Consul Forbes. "Whether California should belong to the U.S. or not must depend mainly on the inhabitants of the country as you are aware that HM Govt have not hitherto sanctioned any expectation that British assistance will be afforded. The number of Americans who creep into California would render time as certain as any other method of placing California in their hands" (*Confidential to Forbes, 13th June, from San Blas*).

Seymour knew the suspicion his move to California would create. He wrote to Consul Forbes, "It being known that I had gone to California would create a supposition that I was authorised to afford that province protection... I proceed there as I would to any place where there are British commercial interests..." (*Misc Letterbook, 15th June, Tres Marias, near San Blas*). Once under way he wrote to Ambassador Bankhead in Mexico City, "I go with full expectation of seeing a Yankee ensign flying there... I have as little authority as need be for making the bite I wished so it will be of little use that I should open my mouth, unless circumstances enable me to do so with more effect than I can now expect. If the connection with Mexico, a principle cause of non-interference of H.M.'s government, shall



have been removed, it seems desirable to ascertain the state of affairs before it is acknowledged to be irremediable" (*Letter, 14 June, Piedra del Mar*).

It was weighing on his mind. He wrote to a friend in Parliament, "The Americans unfortunately are two steps ahead on California. 1. by their interlopers to claim friendly protection. 2. because Mexicans have never separated and the Americans may now take it as a fruit of warfare. I am not sanguine of success as our government have not yet made a footstep in the course. I shall not do so for them without a fair chance of doing so firmly. Things have not laid straight this side of Cape Horn and I am left to guess my way in the difficulties occurred thereby" (*To Horace Simpson MP, 16th June, off Tres Marias*).

It was hot and they were soon becalmed. (Sloat, meanwhile, had arrived at Monterey on either July 1st or 2nd, a full week before he annexed California.) "Men and Petty Officers skylark after quarters on opposite sides" (*Private Diary, July 14th*). Once they made headway again, they were followed by brown albatrosses which caused some concern among the sailors and one was shot for sport - which may have caused further concern. 750 men on a constricted vessel in summer heat needed their outlet. In June they had trekked and hunted ashore in Mexico. In October they even played cricket on an empty beach.

### The Santa Barbara Convention

Those Californian Mexican deputies who managed to get through General Castro's roadblocks to Governor Pico's assembly at Santa Barbara did invoke Britain's help in the latter half of June 1846. Seymour advised the Admiralty the day he decided to sail north, that the southern part of Upper California was "decidedly in favour" of British protection, but "her acceptance has been doubted...some are for the U.S. while a few were for France, mostly connected with the Church. Since notice of the convention, the northern and most valuable part of the province seeks protection from the U.S., furthered by the presence of officers of the U.S. Navy on that coast and the known anxiety of their country to establish a footing in the country" (*To Admiralty, 13th June, San Blas*). Seymour subsequently told the Admiralty, just as he left Monterey in late July, "the Santa Barbara convention failed in consequence of the division of parties of the native Californians acknowledging the authority of Mexico" (*To Admiralty, 22nd July,*

*Monterey*). He followed this up a month later from the Sandwich Islands. "An application was made for Captain Blake's [*HMS Juno at Santa Barbara*] assistance on the ground of the alliance between Mexico and Great Britain entitling the Province [California] to hope for the protection of the latter...the great majority of the Deputies were supposed to be in favour of an attempt to gain the protection of Great Britain but the convention never assembled...Castro stood in the way of Northern District deputies getting past Monterey" (*Final Report to Admiralty, Aug 27th, Honolulu*).

Seymour wrote that report after talking at length with the actors in the drama. He had also travelled for two weeks with MacNamara. The Admiral had written to his son on June 9th that as there was "no alliance defensive or offensive at present with Mexico...we have no reason for interfering with [Jonathan] attacking a Mexican province. The Californians have had the folly to retain [the Mexican] flag and acknowledge a general subjugation which will involve them with its fortunes." The "headaching" increased, part due to the weather and perhaps the old grapeshot wound, part no doubt also to sheer stress of his position. When he went north to join *HMS Juno* at Monterey he knew the Americans would have already decided the issue. He talked of, at most, "retarding" an inevitable outcome, which he had forecast for over a year. "I proceed there as I would to any place with British commercial interests." It was at this point that he summed up his predicament: "In going to California I am drawing in a lottery in which nothing remains but blanks, but I take the only chance of retarding the unfavourable result. I shall visit that province in no sanguine temper, but am desirous of judging if its situation is irremediable. If I

*"In going to California I am drawing in a lottery in which nothing remains but blanks..."*

find on my arrival at Monterey that no good is to be done I shall not stay longer than is necessary to assure myself of the safety of such British subjects as are in the province" (*Private to Lord Ellenborough at the Admiralty, 13 June*).

*Continued Page 38*

*In the long run the pessimist may be proved right, but the optimist has a better time on the trip.*

7.2.184  
PROCLAM  
7.7.18



Admiral Seymour From Page 37

### Conclusion

Bancroft's hunch was right. The British did not have serious positive designs on California, but a negative policy that it should not become American or French. Britain's Admiralty including Seymour and Ellenborough would have liked the harbour facilities of San Francisco, which did not involve all California any more than Macao or Hong Kong would later involve all of China. Seymour and Sloat alike had only negative policy and unspoken nuance from distant governments on which to base their tactics - such was the good feeling between the two they probably commiserated over the port decanter! The one condition on which Sloat could intervene - war with Mexico - was realised; the one condition on which Seymour could intervene - a request from a California newly independent of Mexico - was not realised. It is likely he would have relished "having a go" if given the order, which is why he was Flag Officer of the Pacific! An opening for this came with the announcement of the Santa Barbara convention which galvanised him into going to California. There was clearly no "race" between the squadron commanders, but it made a good story. As for MacNamara, he was "too late" and certainly no government agent or threat to America. His plans made a good "bugaboo" and "bugbear" (Bancroft), useful to the careers of Fremont and Larkin. In fairness the belief was widespread that Britain had designs on California. Great Britain herself was a "bugaboo."

HMS *Juno* sailed north on legitimate surveillance, carrying MacNamara and Hartweg on legitimate Mexican business. Only a faint hope existed that MacNamara might "retard" the inevitable and this is played down by Seymour. The hope was even fainter by the time Seymour himself followed north with HMS *Collingwood* a month later. His mission was accomplished once he saw Monterey taken by America. He knew it would have fallen even before he left San Blas. His private diary records the rest.

### Final Curtain

HMS *Collingwood*, the largest warship in Monterey harbour, acted as a floating conference centre. (The

Admiral's descendants still own *Collingwood's* Ward Room dining table - see pictures) Hospitality visits were exchanged with Sloat, Stockton, who had just arrived with USS *Congress*, and their squadron captains. David Spence, a young Scots meat trader commanding the Monterey foreign volunteers, brought a copy of the American annexation of California of July 17th. MacNamara and Hartweg came aboard like souls adrift. Seymour had written to James Forbes, Acting British Consul in Monterey (not to be confused with Alexander Forbes, Consul at Tepic) on July 17th to invite him aboard. "Finding that the country has been taken possession of by the U.S., it is probable that my stay will be very short... [I am] desirous of seeing you with reference to the interests of H.M. subjects resident in California. I shall await the arrival of *Juno* which Mr Macnamara informs me will be on the 20th inst" (*Misc Letters, 17th July, Monterey*). He made time to stretch his legs and watch Spence's *vaqueros* at work, a visit which probably made Seymour the first official British visitor to land in American California. (Bancroft did include Seymour in the Register of Pioneers!) Forbes came aboard for two days on the night of July 20th. Even Fremont and Gillespie included *Collingwood* in their round of the ships in harbour: according to Bancroft they relieved British officers of many silver dollars in marksmanship displays, like stallholders in a county fair!

Seymour also wrote several pointed letters in harbour. He wrote formally to Forbes after their talks, with an eye to Sloat. He advised that Sloat's was "a provisional occupation only, pending future decisions on the outcome of the contest. I recommend the strictest neutrality" (*Letter, July 22nd*). A copy was penned to Sloat. When Forbes was formally introduced to Sloat on board USS *Savannah*, a salute was fired in his honour! Spares, assistance and provisions were also provided for *Collingwood*. A final gentlemanly letter was sent to commiserate with ex-Governor Pio Pico. "I regret deeply [the American attack] but as the province remained under the authority of Mexico at the time of the attack I could not be justified in interfering."

### The Private Diary

"July 16th [1846] At 5 anchored in the port of Monterey in 1 1/2 fathoms. Found USS *Savannah* alongside 2 frigates in possession of the Port. Commodore Sloat visited me.



"July 17th Headaching weather, very cold. Mr Macnamara, David Spence and Hartweg aboard. Called on Commodore Sloat. Visited by Commodore Stockton and Captain Du Pont of the USS *Congress*. The former says she is 198 feet long. The latter gave me the Honolulu papers which gave me the painful news of a battle between the natives of the Society Islands [Tahiti] and the French.

"July 18th Cold morning. Visited Commodore Sloat and Captain Du Pont aboard *Congress*. At 1 landed and rode to Mr Spence rancho to see some cattle lassoed and thence to the Mission and river Carmela.

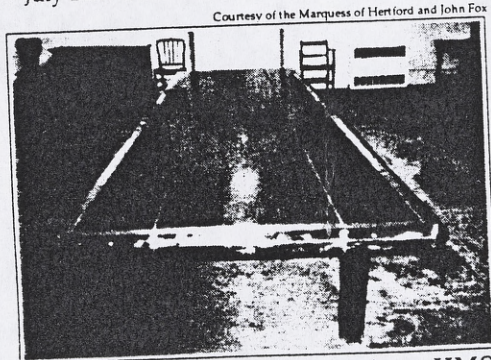
"July 20th Mr Forbes arrived at night.

"July 21st Mr Forbes with me on California affairs all morning. Called on Commodore Sloat and introduced Mr Forbes as Acting Consul who had a salute from *Savannah*. Forbes, Macnamara, Spence and Hartweg dined with me.

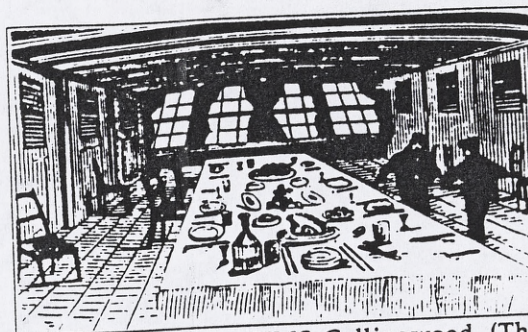
"July 22nd Received visits from Messrs Fremont and Gillespie. The Trappers had been ready to show their skills as marksmen on shore.

"July 23rd Visited Commodore Stockton to compliment him on being appointed to command.

"July 24th Becalmed. Mountainous blackfin



Oak dining table said to be from HMS *Collingwood*'s Ward Room. All the main actors in the California drama of 1846 took of Seymour's hospitality from this table.



The Ward Room on HMS *Collingwood*. (The Graphic, 1845)

whales spouting round the ship. Foggy.

"July 26th Reading Capt Fremont's narrative of his surveys lent me by Capt Du Pont.

"July 28th Mr Macnamara gave me the verses in the Scriptures on which Catholics found the doctrine of Purgatory.

"August 6th Consul-General Miller came aboard with the Honolulu papers."

### Pacific Retrospect

Local vexations swept California to the back of Seymour's mind for much of August. HMS *Juno* met up with him again (they had failed to rendezvous off California and *Juno*'s standing orders from June 5th were to go back to the Sandwich Islands once it became necessary to seek further orders). Sir George com-

*Continued Page 40*



## Admiral Seymour From Page 39

pleted a report for the Admiralty on the California affair just before the end of the month. Besides the wealth of detail already cited it contained forecasts as to what would happen to California, where "the utmost animosity is expressed against the North Americans. The aggression being long in preparation it is expected that there will be numerous accessions to the number of North Americans in the country, both from the states and from Oregon during the approaching autumn. I am informed by one of the Mormon sect that thousands of their persuasion are about to transfer themselves from Nauvoo. The distance will make any permanent connection with a Government at Washington unlikely, these people arriving under a sense of being harshly treated in the U.S., to get possession of California as independent.<sup>6</sup> [California] remained in a disorganised state with an aggravation of evils arising from the mixed origin and lawless nature of its occupants" (*Final Report to Admiralty, August 27th, Honolulu*). He had also written to his son that while 'Jonathan' has improved his position, I hear there are 23,000 Mormons coming to California disenchanted with the States" (*Letter, July 19th, Monterey*). Even the Royal Navy could not foresee the gold rush.

Seymour set out again on patrol. In November a letter arrived from his old friend U.S. Commodore James Biddle, 72 days after its writing. Four days later they met on board Biddle's *USS Independence* heading for California. When Biddle left for Monterey, Seymour had the last word on the good old days of the summer of '46. "I notice among the seamen of the *Columbus* and the *Independence* much less disposition to be respectful to British officers than in Sloat's squadron." (*Private Diary, Dec. 13th*). In American minds, the Admiral's caricature was already reality.

## About the Author:

John Fox is a British high school teacher of Irish immigrant background. Some of his forebears came to the California and Nevada goldfields. An Oxford history graduate and writer, he took a car and tent through the Sierra Nevadas in 1995 as a result of a Teacher Travel Fellowship from the London Com-

pany of Goldsmiths. His research into the Gold Rush Irish 1849-70 is ongoing and he would welcome any correspondence - information, statistics, family details or anecdotes, not to mention research sponsors! All letters answered! 31 London Road, Wheatley, Oxford, OX33 1YJ, United Kingdom.

Mr. Fox is the author of *Forgotten Divisions: The First World War from Both Sides of No Man's Land*, Cheshire, England: Sigma Leisure Press, 1994.

## Acknowledgements are Due:

To the Marquess of Hertford, Admiral Seymour's great-great-grandson, for his kindness in showing the Admiral's relics and giving permission to quote family papers in the *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly*. To the Commanding officer HMS *Collingwood* (Shore Base), Portsmouth. To the archivists, Warwick Record Office. To the Librarian, The Lindley Library, Royal Horticultural Society, London. To the staff of The Bodleian and Rhodes House Libraries, Oxford University.

Courtesy of the Marquess of Hertford and John Fox



Seymour's navy hat. Did he really throw it to the deck in anger? (Courtesy Marquess of Hertford)



## End Notes

1. Hubert Bancroft, *History of California*, Volume 5, pp 200-223, cites some sources for the legends about Seymour.

2. Eugene MacNamara received approval from the Mexican government to settle 2,000 Irish families on a 4,428 acre land grant in the San Joaquin Valley in 1846. He arrived in Monterey on the HMS *Juno* on May 12, 1846. See Richard Rohrbacher's "The California That Nearly Was" in *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* #20.

3. Abraham Nasatir, University of Iowa, *Corral of the Westerners*, 1983, after working on the Seymour papers, cited further sources for the Seymour legends. He also put into sequence excerpts from the papers but missed the private diaries. Possibly contacts continued between Seymour and American officers or MacNamara or Hartweg in later years. Seymour was a good correspondent and friend. The huge range of the Seymour material and lack of time prevented my searching beyond 1846.

4. The U.S. Navy did not have accurate charts of the Gulf of California to the Colorado River mouth. A U.S. expedition in February 1859 was happy to reach "Marshall's Landing" without running aground or hitting a reef. California newspapers. *Los Angeles Southern Vineyard* - Feb. - March 1859, U.S. Military Correspondence, Brevet Lt. Col. W. Hoffman to Clark, Dept of California, 1859, R.G. 393.

5. There is no such rank as a "U.S. Commodore" in 1846. The rank of "Commodore" in the U.S. Navy dates from the mid-1860s. John D. Sloat was the "senior Captain" of a U.S. Naval squadron. The title "Commodore" was purely honorary to signify that senior officer, i.e., "senior Captain of a squadron."

6. This information about the Mormons was not correct. They were headed for Salt Lake, Utah.

## Further Reading

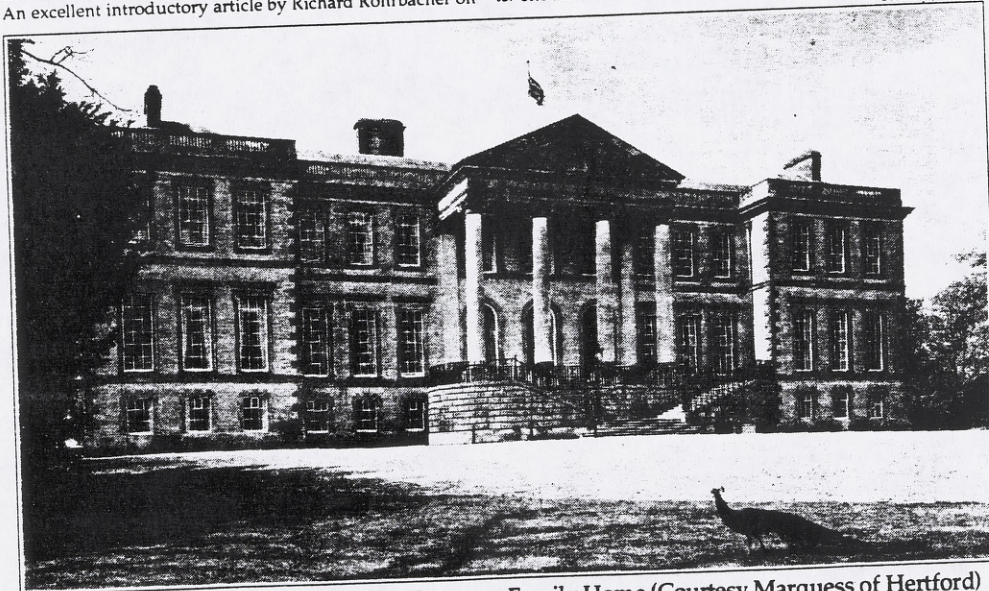
Bancroft and Nasatir, cited in Notes, are succinct sources for 1846. An excellent introductory article by Richard Rohrbacher on

JUNO  
- No! Left Mazatlán 5.12.1846.  
arrived Monterey 6.7.1846

MacNamara appeared in *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* #20, 1994. Honolulu shipping lists and English diocesan lists might be researched for MacNamara. English Catholic dioceses began in 1851 and MacNamara, probably a secular cleric, may have been absorbed into the new framework. Rohrbacher searched widely.

*The History of the Royal Horticultural Society 1804-1968*, (Oxford University Press), has a wealth of references to Hartweg. Hartweg's papers at the RHS will be the subject of a future *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly* article. He was eventually sacked for recording more about politics than about botany! For the Irish rancher settlers in California up to 1846, see Joseph A. King, "The Overland Parties to California, 1844 and 1846," Chapter 4 in *Patterns of Migration*, P. O'Sullivan, ed., Leicester University Press, England, distributed in USA and Canada by St Martin's Press. Also, Margaret E. Fitzgerald and Joseph A. King, *The Uncounted Irish*, (Meany, Toronto, 1990), Chapter 12, "California Lure of Gold and Soil." Meticulous and indispensable groundwork. Bancroft's *Pioneer Register* should also be consulted.

Courtesy John Fox



East Front, Ragley Hall, Alcester. The Seymour Family Home (Courtesy Marquess of Hertford)